

**Biological Weapons Convention
Meeting of Experts
NGO Statements
10-14 August 2015**



Mr Chairman, Distinguished Representatives: The University of London greatly appreciates the opportunity to address this BWC Meeting of Experts.

With other academic colleagues and representatives of governments and civil society we were glad to take part in the commemorative event on 30 March 2015 which marked the 40th anniversary of the entry into force of the Convention. That commemoration gave States Parties an opportunity to commit themselves afresh to sustained actions in support of biological disarmament. Sustaining the BWC in the years ahead requires much hard work to be done behind the scenes both here in Geneva and in capitals. We recognise the 'invisible' work that produced the BWC and that remains needed today to uphold the BWC and make it work better in the interests of all. That applies to every one of the items on the agenda of the Meeting of Experts, which this statement will address.

This is also the first BWC meeting after another anniversary: It is 90 years since the Geneva Protocol was signed on 17 June 1925. We have used that anniversary to celebrate the Geneva Protocol as a crucial anchor for CBW arms control and the foundation on which the international legal architecture has been constructed to prohibit and prevent all CBW activity. Both treaties—BWC and CWC—complement the principles established in 1925.¹

Looking back over the history of the treaty-building processes, we recognise the contributions of many states and individuals determined to solve problems and overcome obstacles. The same tenacity of purpose and sustained effort in multilateral diplomacy will be just as necessary over the next forty years of the BWC as it was throughout the first forty, but increasingly this requires new or renewed engagement with non-state actors.

Your standing agenda item on **Strengthening National Implementation** is key to how effectively all BW activity is both prohibited and prevented. Although the legal framework of implementation varies from one State Party to another, as foreseen in Article IV, its stringency when applied must be effective worldwide with no gaps. And that is why the sharing of national experience is so valuable. Experiences, proposals and initiatives discussed here contribute to an international repertory of good practice. This applies to education and awareness-raising, to codes of conduct for life scientists, to biosafety and biosecurity, as well as to legislative and administrative provisions which enforce the prohibitions of the BWC. Your sessions devoted to this agenda item can benefit from the pooling of national experiences in more widely shared practices. These are no threat to state sovereignty: On the contrary, there is much to be gained from international bio-risk standards and comparable procedures to strengthen national implementation.

What is more, it should be possible to welcome a wide range of initiatives and include them in the documentation of the BWC, without necessarily conferring collective approval on every proposal or initiative mentioned. The basic change of mind-set required is from seeking consensus by deletion to the harder but more rewarding pursuit of consensus by inclusion. If such a change of mind-set can be carried forward from this Meeting of Experts to the Meeting of States Parties in

December, the delegations drafting the resulting Report may be less preoccupied with blocking opponents' draft language and concentrate rather on searching for more widely acceptable language. We encourage States Parties to be more inclusive.

Turning next to **Science and Technology** (S&T), there is a strong case for upgrading the annual review of relevant S&T developments into an Open-Ended Working Group of a full week's duration each year and with more adequate resources. This upgrading would be a major element in creating a robust and effective intersessional process at the Eighth Review Conference.² However, within the constraints of the existing intersessional process, we hope your Meeting of Experts will make full use of the time allocated to this agenda item. The review of S&T has several aspects across the specified range of topics. Sharing knowledge is essential for the health of the BWC. So too is a comprehensive analysis of risk. Prudent and precautionary regulation of all activity in the life sciences is vital to confidence in the Convention, and this could well be the subject of recommendations going forward to the Meeting of States Parties. We draw your attention particularly to the relevance of gene-editing technologies and gain-of-function experiments.^{3,4}

On every agenda item this week we hope the Meeting of Experts will bear in mind the BWC's overall need to find means of reassurance. This is where the BWC is weakest. Many efforts have been made to remedy this weakness and it is vital that they should continue. We particularly encourage the production of working papers and initiatives that cross the boundaries of the existing Groups and demonstrate imaginative solutions with wide-ranging support. All States Parties, and the wider world of civil society, need to be reassured in two respects: First, that everything their own and other governments are doing is consistent with their BWC obligations; and second, that all activity in the life sciences is regulated and conducted in ways that do not threaten the BWC or test its limits. Greater transparency in areas such as dual-use research of concern is to be commended. Information that really builds confidence needs to be identified and exchanged, and stronger mechanisms for declaring, documenting and demonstrating adherence to the Convention need to be developed.⁵

Mr Chairman, Distinguished Representatives: We wish you a successful and productive week, and we thank you for your attention to our statement.

Dr Filippa Lentzos

Senior Research Fellow, Department of Social Science, Health & Medicine, King's College London

Mr Nicholas Sims

Emeritus Reader in International Relations, London School of Economics & Political Science

Prof Brian Balmer

Professor in Science Policy Studies, Department of Science & Technology Studies, University College London

* The University of London dates from 1836, and is a major component of the higher education sector in the United Kingdom and beyond. It has evolved into a confederation of academically and financially autonomous colleges, which continue to share some central University of London institutions and a long history of joint endeavours in education and research. University College London (founded 1826) and King's College London (founded 1829) were the original colleges of the University of London, while the London School of Economics & Political Science (founded 1895) joined in 1900.

¹ Spelling, Balmer & McLeish, '[The Geneva Protocol at 90: An Anchor for Arms Control](#),' *The Guardian* 17 June 2015

² Pearson, Lentzos & Sims, 'Reviving the intersessional process: Achieving effective action,' Bradford Briefing Paper July 2015

³ Lentzos, van der Bruggen & Nixdorff, '[Can we trust scientists' self-control?](#)' *The Guardian* 26 April 2015

⁴ Lentzos, 'Mutational technologies: Engage public in gene-editing policy,' *Nature* Vol.521(7552): 289

⁵ Lentzos, '3D BIO: Declare, Document & Demonstrate' EU Non-Proliferation Consortium Paper No.45 April 2015